

dashing against the roofs and sides and windows”

The week that followed brought “the worst flood in the recorded history of eastern Oklahoma,” Kerr wrote. “In some places, 15 inches of rain fell in a two-day span. Tulsa had sixteen inches of almost continual rainfall”

The three rivers of the Three Forks area all peaked at flood stage simultaneously, carrying 700,000 cubic feet of water per second past Muskogee — twice as large as the flood the previous week. The Arkansas River was as much as 50 feet deep and eight miles wide.

“In a five-hundred mile swath of reckless anger, the waters rolled over the land, houses, farms, stores, factories, highways, and acres of grain and food. Planes flying over the desolate area to spot marooned families saw . . . white faces of terror-stricken people on a bridge waiting to be rescued, four persons on a farm house frantically waving a white table cloth in the hope of being spotted, and islands of high land where people and animals huddled in common shelter

. . . . Fire and typhoid threatened every community”

When the water receded, baring new scenes of damage and loss, Kerr toured the area and recalled one farmer in particular, S.W. Armstrong, in the Vian Bottoms:

“We sat on a cottonwood log, brushing away the insects, and talked. He was a light, wiry man who wore a wide brimmed straw hat over a face leathered by wind and sun, and his trousers were held up by red suspenders. He sat despondently kicking his foot in the sand and said, ‘I have spent my whole life developing this acreage, and making it produce for me.’ He picked up a handful of the fine sand and let it drop through his fingers.

“‘Now,’ Armstrong said bitterly, ‘pick any part, and I’ll sell it to you for fifty cents an acre.’”

It was “a turning point,” Kerr recalled. From the desolation and destruction of the 1943 flood, “a citizens’ crusade was born to reduce or stop this needless waste and misery.” The leader of the crusade would be Bob Kerr.⁴

